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Posted by Editor on Jun 12, 2012 in Lakeshore East, Lakeshore East Park, New East Side, The Loop | 1 comment

Lakeshore East Finally Gets A School But Not What It Expected



For as long as there have been bulldozers turning dirt in Lakeshore East, there have been neighbors anxiously, even angrily, awaiting the construction of a new public elementary school to once and for all turn the development into a neighborhood.

We can report the good news — a school is coming. And the bad news — It's not going to be public.

One of the hazards of being an urban pioneer is that the promises of developers and real estate agents too often don't come true. In 2004 an NNP leasing agent promised us that a supermarket would be built in Lakeshore East within two months. It actually took a decade before the

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(admittedly fantastic) Mariano's Fresh Market opened at Lakeshore East's

Village Market.

Similarly, young couples bought condominiums in [The Lancaster](#) (201 North Westshore Drive) and other nearby towers believing what they were told — that a public school would soon open at Lakeshore East. It seemed a perfect opportunity to buy a home, settle down, and raise a family. But while the children came, the school never did.

While prone to fits of puffery, the real estate and leasing agents aren't entirely to blame. We found documentation from way back in the 1970's requiring the developers of Lakeshore East to build a school. From the Chicago City Council Journal, March 1, 1979:

"An area to be reserved for public school purposes shall be located in a structure with access by walkway to the public park; the location, design and specifications subject to the review and approval of the Chicago Board of Education and approval by the Department of Planning and Development."

That seems pretty clear.

Almost the same language was used by the City Council when it reiterated the requirement on March 8, 1993:

"L. Public Elementary School

An area to be reserved for public elementary school purposes shall be located in a structure with access by walkway to the Public Park; the location, design and specifications subject to the review and approval of the Chicago Board of Education and approval by the Department of Planning and Development in accordance with the provisions of the 1993 Amendatory Lakefront Ordinance."

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maximum total reduction of 3,000,000 square feet. This penalty provision shall apply in addition to any remedies which may be available under the Chicago Zoning Ordinance.

L) Public Elementary School.

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But by June 19, 2002, the language seemed to be softened:

"Provided the applicant is instructed to proceed by the City of Chicago, the Chicago Board of Education and the Chicago Park District, and provided with specific building specifications no later than June 30, 2002, the applicant shall be responsible for the construction of a forty-five thousand (45,000) square foot portion of a fifty-three thousand (53,000) square foot structure to contain a public elementary school with space to be shared with the

Chicago Park District to be substantially completed on or before

June 30, 2004."

It's nice that there were specific dates mentioned, but the beginning of that paragraph is troubling: "Provided the applicant is instructed to proceed."

That paragraph was first passed November 14, 2000, and then again on June 19, 2002. Presumably Lakeshore East didn't get those instructions in the 11 days between when the city council adopted the resolution the second time and its deadline of June 30, 2002.

Development diagrams of Lakeshore East filed with the city of Chicago in 2001 and 2002 showed a six-story school in the northeast corner of Lakeshore East Park. Then one day the school disappeared. It was supposedly moved across the street into the corner of East South Water Street and North Westshore Drive between The Shoreham and The Lancaster. But more recent filings show that area filled with townhouses.

So, where did the school go? Initially, where all the cool kids went: Aqua.

By 2009, Magellan Group was trying to put the school inside its new showcase building, Aqua. Phase one would have been 11,600 square feet and been for very young children. According to an October 22, 2009 letter from the Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning to Magellan's lawyer, "There would also be a Phase II and Phase III that would accommodate K thru [sic] 5 and ultimately thru [sic] grade 12."

It was that same letter that took the "public" out of "public school." Its final paragraph states, "The Chicago Zoning Ordinance does not distinguish between public and private schools, therefore, a private school is a permitted use as well."

So what is this private school that's coming to Lakeshore East?

It's called Gems Academy, and it describes itself as "an international education company that owns and operates high performing schools." It operates schools in nine countries, including Gems Academy in Lincoln Park. The Lakeshore East location will be only its second American presence.

With so many consulates in the Illinois Center and along Michigan Avenue, and so many diplomats and support staff living at Aqua, Lakeshore East would seem a perfect location for an international school.

But it turns out that Aqua isn't.

We've been told that the



Possible location of Little Gems Academy in Lakeshore East

location of the new

Little Gems Academy will be the vacant plot of land just to the west of [The Tides](#) (360 East South Water Street). The building is being designed by BKL Architecture, the same folks who are behind The Coast next door (345 East Wacker Drive).

The design is still at its cocktail napkin stage, so it'll be a while before we see any drawings, but that location is zoned for a building up to 70 feet tall.

Which way it will go is anybody's guess. It could go super cutting-edge to generate masses of publicity like Aqua did. Or it could go ultra conservative traditional, matching the well-heeled parents of the students who might go there. Or it could just be brown and modern, like the townhouses next door.

Even if it's not innovative on the outside, it should be on the inside. A bird in a tree in Lakeshore East Park chirped to us that one idea being toyed with is a massive elevator so that when a class enters or leaves the building, all the children can stay together. Pretty cool.

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